

## News focus

### Designs on intelligence

A US court began last month considering whether 'intelligent design' has any case for being taught as an alternative to Darwinian evolution, while a new film about penguins is being lauded by the Christian right as evidence of just such a mechanism. **Nigel Williams** reports.

An expected six-week court case, due to conclude next month, pits US biologists' commitment to the evolutionary theories of Darwin once again against religious opponents with more biblical views. In a Pennsylvania courtroom a test case could decide how evolution is taught in state schools. The civil trial, triggered last year by a classroom battle, marks the beginning of the first major legal assault on evolution in 18 years. The case also represents the first legal test of 'intelligent design', the belief that life on earth is too complex to

be explained by natural selection and therefore a guiding force must be involved.

In the initial court hearings, supporters argued intelligent design does not stipulate what that guiding force might be, and is therefore not a religion.

Its opponents derided it as a mere repackaging of creationism, the religious dogma that God brought life into being in its present form a few thousand years ago.

It is a test of strength which researchers and their secular supporters hope will prove

decisive in destroying the scientific credibility of intelligent design once and for all.

The defendants were the school board from the School of Dover, Pennsylvania, which last year became the first district in the country to require its teachers to question the scientific underpinning of evolution.

The Dover case is taking place in Harrisburg, an area of conservative rural America in the heart of the traditionally liberal north-east, more in common with the south or mid-west than the urban areas nearby.

"The theory is not a fact. Gaps in the theory exist for which there is no evidence," Dover teachers had to tell their students.

"Intelligent design is an



**Battleground:** The Pennsylvania town of Harrisburg is presently the scene of a fight between the evolutionary theory of Charles Darwin and proponents of 'intelligent design' who argue that there must have been some guiding force in the process. Some critics have labelled the new view: 'creationism lite'. (Photo: Empics.)

explanation of the origin of life that differs from Darwin's view."

The parents' legal team launched an assault on intelligent design, describing it as a "clever, tactical repackaging of creationism", which the Supreme Court ruled in 1987 could not be taught alongside evolution.

"It is a wedge strategy to overturn the rules of science," argues Eric Rothschild, the lead lawyer for the plaintiffs. "It's creationism with the words 'God' and 'Bible' left out. Intelligent design is not science in its infancy. It's not science at all."

While this court case goes on, a new film on release in the US has

been seized upon by the Christian right as evidence of 'intelligent design' and a lesson in their traditional family values.

The surprising topic is the emperor penguin, star of the film *March of the Penguins*, an epic natural history documentary made by a French team of film-makers.

Audiences and critics of the film have marvelled at the sight of emperor penguins walking the 70 miles, in single file, to their breeding grounds during the harsh Antarctic winter in temperatures of  $-40^{\circ}\text{C}$ . One reviewer wrote; "It's impossible to watch the thousands of penguins huddled together against the icy Antarctic blasts... without feeling a tug of anthropomorphic kinship."

And America's religious right has been agreeing. Film critic Michael Medved was quoted by the *New York Times* calling it "the motion picture this summer that most passionately affirms traditional norms like monogamy, sacrifice and child rearing."

Andrew Coffin, writing in the Christian publication *World Magazine* said such miracles of nature were evidence that life is too complex to have arisen through Darwinian random selection: "That any one of these eggs survives is a remarkable feat — and some might suppose, a strong case for intelligent design. It's sad that acknowledgement of a creator is absent in the examination of such strange and wonderful animals."

Against such a backdrop, organisers of a major new exhibition on Charles Darwin at the American Museum of Natural History in New York next month are expecting controversy and tackle the issue of intelligent design head-on, although baffled by its prominence. The exhibition will try to point out the difference between science and religion as the basis of these arguments and will not present the issue of intelligent design as some sort of debate. "I don't see it as a debate in my own mind since Darwin is so fundamental to modern science", says museum provost, Michael Novacek.



**Role model:** The 'family values' of emperor penguins shown in a new film have been championed by the American Christian right. (Picture: Photolibrary.)